

critical digest

Vol. II No 9

December 19, 1949

The Weekly That Keeps You Informed Of The Current Broadway Critical Scene

N.Y. Openings This Week

Caesar and Cleopatra-National, 12/20/49. Revival of GBS comedy starring Sir Cedric Hardwicke and Lilli Palmer opens without pre-Broadway tour. Hardwicke replaced Sam Wanamaker as director. Produced by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers.

The Rat Race-Barrymore, 12/22/49. Garson Kanin comedy produced by Leland Hayward stars Betty Field. Boston critics were disappointed with the story told in the comedy, though they liked the characters and the players. All agreed that much hard work was needed to whip it into a hit. Evidently some of this work was accomplished because the three Philadelphia critics praised the show. The Bulletin's R.E.P. Senderfer called it "Rattling good melodrama, crowds a full measure of excitement and laughter into a literate play".

Quick Glance at New Shows -- digests on inside pages.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes-Ziegfeld, 12/8/49. The critics, with one exception, preferred Carol Channing, Anita Alvarez, the dances, the costumes and some of the music in this lavish version of Anita Loos' classic. Watts, Post, was the sole dissenter, while several of the critics didn't think the music was as good as the rest of the show.

Shows That Closed

A Streetcar Named Desire-Barrymore, 12/3/47-12/17/49. Tennessee Williams' play which has drawn mixed notices from the critics abroad found most of the N.Y. critics on the "pro" side. For very different reasons the three critics against the play were from the Daily Worker, Catholic World and Christian Science Monitor. Atkinson, Times, thought it was a little too lengthy, but otherwise a superb drama.

Regina-46th Street Theatre, 10/31/49-12/17/49. Blitzstein musical version of Little Foxes posted closing notice. Clifford Odets, Moss Hart, George Jessel, Cole Porter, Mike Todd and seven other top show people paid for a display ad urging the public to see the show.

The Closing Door-Empire, 12/1/49-12/17/49. Alexander Knox' melodram starring Mr. and Mrs. Knox was panned by most of the critics, though his performance was praised. The rising elevator in the middle of the stage fascinated several of the critics.

Yes, M'Lord-Booth, 10/4/49-12/17/49. A.E. Matthews won a personal triumph from the N.Y. critics on the eve of his 80th birthday. But the play by W. Douglas Home didn't find many supporters.

Magazine Reviewers Look at the New Shows -- digests on inside pages.

Metropole - 12/8/49-12/9/49. Gibbs, New Yorker, thought the editor of the magazine may have been a composite Luce man on Time, or possibly an editor of Popular Mechanics. Gabriel, Cue, guessed the editor was really Horace Greeley. None saw any resemblance in plot or character to the New Yorker staff.

Clutterbuck-Biltmore, 12/3/49. Daily Worker, Christian Science Monitor and George Jean Nathan found the Benn Levy comedy lacking in real comedy. Colby, Journal of Commerce, liked the show very much.

N.Y.C. Criticism At A Glance -- see page 836 -- Cumulative Index Issued Monthly

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Brooklyn Eagle Names New Critic

Louis Shcaffer has been named drama critic and drama department head of the Brooklyn Eagle. George Currie, who succeeded Arthur Pollock as drama critic, has been assigned to book reviews and feature story work. Martin Dickstein will write a general show business column.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

a. Times --Pro-- Happy Days are here again. Vestly enjoyable song and dance antic put on with humorous perfection. Channing portrait the most fabulous comic creation of this dreary period in history. Singularly affable cast. Spirit is modern and pace is swift. Every part is alive and abundantly entertaining.-Atkinson.

b. Herald Tribune --Pro-- Noisy, jubilant, nostalgic, musical comedy. Channing altogether enchanting, her performance is first rank, does wonders in carrying an over-long show through laggard interludes. Surrounded by large and exhuberant company. Score is wanting in distinction, some forced and irrelevant numbers.-Barnes.

c. News --Pro-- Everything is precisely right. Score has zest, melody, perfectly chosen lyrics. Channing funniest female to hit boards since Brice and Lillie. Kovic and Alvarez dance one of best things in show. The evening you see it will be the holiday of the year.-Chapman.

d. Mirror --Pro-- Channing scored a triumph. What magic memories she evoked with her artful pretense, gravelly voice and mincing walk. First rate cast. Dancing is amusing, though not off the De Mille top shelf. Pleasant score. Has its faults, but let's not quibble.-Coleman.

e. Compass --Pro-- First rate show full of life, merry, gay and good looking. Slack periods are so few and so brief that when something happens to give show a big new lift, they are forgotten. Some of the funniest scenes in theatre today. Channing marvel of humor, at best she is terrific. Good cast throughout.-Pollock.

f. Post --Con-- Everyone around me seemed to be having gayest sort of time, but show struck me as oddly commonplace, while Channing awed rather than delighted me. Casting of two towering girls in leads produced serie effect. Virtually all brilliant wit and satire of book is absent, kind of routine extravaganza is substituted. Music sounded undistinguished as did lyrics. Had more fun at Texas Li'l Darlin'.--Watts.

g. Sun --Pro-- Jubilant, old-fashioned show of the brazen 20s, lots of dancing from zestful, high-kicking chorus, some near nudity and nobody bothering about a ballet. Style, movement, quite a lot of class and some humor. Music spirited, lyrics quite all right, good enough book. Channing wonderful in caricature of the heroine of the original book. Alice Pearce is very funny.-Morehouse.

h. World Telegram --Pro-- Gaudy, rip-roaring, brash. Proves that Channing is one of the most extraordinary people in the entertainment world today. Greet many pleasant people given generously to this big county fair of a show. Alvarez far too talented for job given her. A vivid experience.-Hawkins.

i. Journal American --Pro-- Gilt and girlie extravaganza wonderfully put together. Entire cast superior. Broadway musical at its 1949-1950 best; shiny, speedy and sophisticated. Channing will not be unstarred much longer. Happy musical comedy days are here again. Hurray!-Garland.

Power of the Critics -- Finance Department

Nancy Andrews, who the critics loved in Touch and Go, told the Compass' Paul Pett how her rave reviews came in handy. She applied to a bank for a loan to buy a sheared fox coat. Her application, which read merely "actress", was delayed until the credit man recognized her name. The loan went through.

Pemberton's Second Thoughts on Critics

Brock Pemberton, ex-drama critic and producer of Love Me Long, had a few suggestions on what to do about critics when he wrote a guest column for the traveling Ward Morehouse of the N.Y. Sun. Pemberton recalled the Shubert custom at the Winter Garden which guaranteed good notices. A champagne party was given before the opening, and the glow usually lingered until the reviews were written. If this wouldn't work today, the producer dropped a not so gentle hint that it might be nice if all the critics went on trans-Atlantic jaunts before his next opening.

That Lady

a. Christian Science Monitor --Con-- All a bit too high flown, direction seems to have capitalized on this artificial quality. Cornell performance seems to be an attempt to compensate for lack of depth in the part or situations. Her touching moments come too late to offset elaborate, languid story.--Beaufort.

b. Commonweal --Con-- Public knowledge that play does not provide smooth sailing for anyone. Pity Cornell and cast had to be wasted. Not since Barretts have we had Cornell even in a state of drama.--Pholan.

c. New Republic --Pro-- Cornell much in her element, had good time seeing her. Only objection is that it is thinly written in naturalistic mode, and what it wants is exultant bloodiness of a D'Annunzio. Cast remarkably unified.--Clurman.

Texas Li'l Darlin'

d. Commonweal --Pro-- Fine and witty evening. Like Hatcher best, Delmar manages endearing job, admit to loving Scholl. The business is small, very gay and drew the happiest second night audience in town.--Pholan.

e. New Republic --Con-- In a Bolger revue three years ago there was a sketch predicting that the success of Oklahoma would be followed by a series of musicals, each devoted to a state. This is like one of such a series.--Clurman.

f. Daily Worker --Pro-- Amusing musical that could have gone places if it had really sunk its teeth into the subject it was lampooning: American politics. It's all very nice and amiable, but too nice. No one got past light spoofing stage.--Rubin.

g. Christian Science Monitor --Pro-- Makings of satirical jost on politics. Good cast, competent production, some bright songs. Not exactly an enchanted evening, but pleasant one. Fault is book doesn't develop comic situation.--R.N.

Closing Door

h. Christian Science Monitor --Con-- Affair wears air of hokum, clinical details slow down and dilute melodrama. Contrived scenes.--R.N.

i. Daily Worker --Con -- Horrible mish-mash of embarrassing awkward play writing and even more embarrassing psychoanalyzing. Nolan suffered, but no more than I did. Knox, the actor, goes down fighting to the last in his own play.--Rubin.

j. New Republic --Pro-- Play is mostly nonsense, but hardly pretends to be anything more. Did scare me, play was fun. Strasberg direction, Morison's setting and few of performances struck some notes of truth.--Clurman.

k. George Jean Nathan --Con-- Play rings as false as other such possibly logical things as some of Hamlet's words to Ophelia or almost all of those of Henry in Anne of the 1000 Days. If you go to melodrama in mood you would go to women's baseball game or average serious movie you might be diverted.

Broadway at Mid-Century

"Realistic, poetic, medical, mystical, full of current quality of slender pity and stout protest, playing havoc with all the three tenses, the seven senses and the old fashioned scene plots." This is the picture of the American theatre today as seen by Gilbert Gabriel in Cue's feature New York At Mid-Century. "The play house is groping for new dimensions and having them. New conglomerations, new truths, new beauties and new fevers. We're still running downhill fast, to what seems more than ever like the summit of the whole world's stage."

Clutterbuck

a. Journal of Commerce --Pro-- Offers a twinkling escape from any problems you might have despite its failure to solve them. Designed for laughter show is true to blueprint. Expert comedians hold the stage and fortify the play.-Colby.

b. Wall Street Journal --So-So-- If you have leaning toward British humor, play will give you lots of it, and of pretty good variety. But don't expect play to equal the lines. Has middling good first act, pretty funny second act and so-so finale.-Cooke.

c. Daily Worker --Con-- Another summer theatre cream puff by the author of Springtime for Henry. Amiable comics in dubious nonsense.-Rubin.

d. Christian Science Monitor --Con-- Trivial comedy, shallow characters talk themselves in and out of shallow friendships according to a kind of geometric plan. Coward devised similar situations with more wit.-R.N.

e. George Jean Nathan --Con-- Situations would profit from craftier hand of a Sascha Guitry and play as whole from combined wit of Maugham and Lonsdale. Cast not too aptly suited to this kind of comedy.

Metropole

f. New Yorker --Con-- Concerned with magazine I took to be Time, though some did think it was Popular Mechanics. But editor was obviously composite of Luce man. Possible satisfactory comedy can be written about magazine, even this one. Cast gave capable performances, if high spirited for corridors of weekly magazine, where the level of vitality is somewhat low.-Gibbs.

g. Cue --Con-- Playwright must have meant Horace Greeley as his editor, judging from chin whiskers the entire evening wore. Too bad Tracy couldn't make more out of play than one long galley proof of pandemonium.-Gabriel.

h. Variety --Con-- A mild imitation of Front Page with none of its good points. Might be lively film material. Tracy gives one of finest performances in recent seasons. Little more than flamboyant character sketch.-Hobe.

i. Billboard --Con-- Promising first stem try for new playwright, but that's all it just hasn't got what it takes in spite of Kaufman's artful gagging up of the proceedings. Plot too skimpily mediocre for entire evening. Tracy tops.-Francis.

j. Time --Con-- Spoofed New Yorker with stridency better suited to that of old Police Gazette. Despite Tracy expert performance it contains no fun at all.

Basic Spelling Urged By Chapman

Edward Bernays report left out the important angle of simplified spellings and pronunciations in the theatre, complained John Chapman, News. How can a theatre patron go to a show he can't pronounce, how is a drama editor going to put a piece in the paper about a show he can't spell, how is a stage fan going to write to a star if he can't spell the star's name? Simplified spelling would solve all these problems and many more, Chapman concluded.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

a. Variety --Pro-- Star was born and her name is Carol Channing. Story might be somewhat different without her expert casting. Productionally it is ultra Frothy musical sans message or purpose other than to divert and entertain the customers. Achieves mission right handsomely.--Hobo.

b. Billboard --So-So-- Glistening, loud musical, frequently much too loud when its singing ensemble goes to work. Not altogether up to huzzahs echoing from out of town break in. Far better musicals have been and will be again. Moments when tale simmers go languor. Tunes not off Styne's top shelf, lyrics carry scant distinction. Channing casting one of most engaging in many seasons, Alvarez dancing sensational, De Mille's dance patterns superlative.--Francis.

c. Morning Telegraph --Pro-- Producer Levin is Santa, restored the art of musical comedy. Fun, beautiful, tuneful, has a chorus line, thank God. Offers blonde comedienne who knows what the score is and how to chalk it up. The tired business man has a show he can go to again. Music and lyrics you can remember.--Bolton.

d. Brooklyn Eagle --Pro-- Channing responsible for making it a solid, resounding hit. Roles fattened up with color and individuality by the talented folks playing them. Big, handsome, easily most sumptuous looking musical in town.--Sheaffer.

e. Newark News --Pro-- Glistening, rakish extravagance abounds in success ingredients. Gleeeful concoction, brimming with tangible assets, though song and book not up to hit standards. Channing's droll character playing dominates.--Field.

f. Women's Wear Daily --Pro-- A hit that is infinitely better in a number of notable parts than in show as whole. Sensational triumph scored by Channing and Alvarez. Enough worthwhile material to make tolerant observer overlook some of routine stereotyped or uninspired spasms.--Dash.

g. Cue --So-So-- Welcome back to Loos' hardy old bedtime classic in different and deluxe edition, replete with ribald song, much handsome dance and multiple scenery. Strong cast, stylish staging. It just couldn't be funnier for one act, but there are two acts. Alvarez is loveliest thing in show.--Gabriel.

h. Newsweek --Pro-- Lorelei never been so wistful and wonderful as she is now impersonated by Channing. Triumphant old fashioned musical is smooth working collaboration. Channing is Lorelei to the life. She is one of the most stimulating things that has happened to the musical stage in years.

i. Time --So-So-- Thanks to Channing song numbers and to some fast youthful De Mille dance routines, show achieves an air of liveliness in places. Never wins any of real nostalgic of 20s. Channing more like football heroine in varsity show than fragile Lorelei.

Key to N.Y.C. Criticism At A Glance

Reviewers rated as to how they like the show, not if they think it will be a hit. "Pro" means the reviewer recommends the show for an entertaining or stimulating evening. "Con" means he doesn't recommend it as such. "So-So" means the reviewer didn't state his preference directly.

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|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. NY Times | 11. Newark News | 21. Catholic World |
| 2. NY Herald Tribune | 12. Women's Wear Daily | 22. Commonwealth |
| 3. NY News | 13. Daily Worker | 23. Cue |
| 4. NY Mirror | 14. Wall St. Journal | 24. Ch. Sci. Monitor |
| 5. NY Compass (Star, PM) | 15. Journal of Commerce | 25. Sat. Review Lit. |
| 6. NY Post | 16. George Jean Nathan | 26. Newsweek |
| 7. NY Sun | 17. Morning Telegraph | 27. Time |
| 8. NY Journal American | 18. Variety | 28. Nation |
| 9. NY World Telegram | 19. Billboard | 29. New Republic |
| 10. Brooklyn Eagle | 20. Theatre Arts | 30. New Yorker |

N.Y.C. Criticism At A Glance -- see page 835 for key

As The Girls Go Broadway, 11/14/48. Pro: 1-4-6-7-8-10-11-12-14-15-16-18-19-23-26-27-29-30. Con: 2-5-17-22. So-So: 3-9-20-21.

Born Yesterday-Miller, 2/2/49. All 30 critics voted "Pro".

Clutterbuck-Biltmore, 12/3/49. Pro: 5-6-7-8-12-17-19-23-27-30. Con: 1-9-11-18-26. So-So: 2-4.

Death Of A Salesman-Morosco, 2/10/49. Pro: 28 votes. Con: Nation. So-So: Time

Detective Story-Hudson, 3/23/49. Pro: 1-2-3-4-6-7-8-9-12-14-15-17-18-19-20-22-23-26-27-30.

Diamond Lil-Flymouth, 2/5/49. 30 reviews for Mae. 30 reviews against her play.

I Know My Love-Shubert, 11/1/49. Pro: 2-3-4-6-7-8-10-11-12-14-15-17-18-19-23-26. Con: 1-5-22-27-30.

Kiss Me, Kate-Century, 12/31/48. Pro: 28 votes. Con: New Republic. So-So: No review in Nation.

Lend An Ear-Mansfield, 12/16/48. Pro: 1-2-3-4-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-15-16-17-18-19-20-21-22-23-24-26-27-30. Con: 5-13-29. So-So: 14-28.

Lost In The Stars-Music Box, 10/30/49. Pro: 1-2-3-5-6-7-10-11-12-14-15-17-18-19-20-21-22-23-24-26-27-30. Con: 5-13-29. So-So: 4-27.

Miss Liberty-Imperial, 7/15/49. Pro: 4-7-8-12-18-19. Con: 1-2-18-20-23-27-29. So-So: 3-6-9-21-26.

Mister Roberts-Alvin, 2/13/49. Pro: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10-11-12-14-15-18-19-20-22-23-25-26-27-29-30. Con: 24. So-So: 2-15-17.

Montserrat-Fulton, 10/29/49. Pro: 3-5-6-8-9-11-12-13-22-27. Con: 1-4-7-10-14-16-18-19-23-24-25-26-28-30. So-So: 2-15-17.

South Pacific-Majestic, 4/8/49. Pro: 1-2-3-4-6-7-8-9-12-15-17-18-19-20-24-25-26-30. So-So: 24-27.

Texas Li'l Darlin'-Hellinger, 11/25/49. Pro: 3-6-9-12-14-15-16-17. Con: 1-4-4-8-18-19-23-30. So-So: 2-5-10-11-26-27.

That Lady-Beck, 11/22/49. Pro: 1-9-10-11-19. Con: 2-3-5-6-8-12-14-16-17-18-23-26-27-28-30. So-So: 4-7.

The Father-Cort, 11/16/49. Pro: 3-10-11-17-23-26. Con: 2-4-5-7-8-9-12-13-14-16-19-22-24-27-30. So-So: 1-6-18-28.

The Madwoman of Chaillot-Royale, 12/28/48. Pro: 1-2-3-5-11-12-13-14-18-20-21-22-23-24-25-26-27-29-30. Con: 4-6-7-8-15-16-19-28. So-So: 9-10.

Touch and Go-Broadhurst, 10/13/49. Pro: 1-3-6-9-11-12-13-15-16-17-23-24-26-27-28-30. Con: 2-4-5-7-14-18-19-20-22. So-So: 8-10-29.

Where's Charley?-St. James, 10/11/49. Pro: 1-2-3-5-8-11-14-15-17-18-20-21-23-29-30. Con: 6-7-12-13-16-19-22-24-25-26. So-So: 4-27.

